The Chronicles Of Electra

By Mary Catharine Hews

IN accordance with a promise given to Electra at breakfast time, Miss Wagner went downstairs and entered Mrs. Barker's little sitting room just as the clock was striking 9. Electra, with her hat already on, stood by the table, writing something upon the margin of the Weekly Chronicle. Her forehead wore a puzzled frown, and she hesitated now and then, moving her lips in apparent perplexity and gazing abstractedly at her pencil. But she welcomed Miss Wagner with a beaming smile and as soon as she had written the last word folded the strip of paper into squares and tucked it indifferently into her pocket.

In her longest and most stiffly starched calico tier Electra had an air of being in full dress. It was pink—the pale, delicate pink that ranked next to cross barred muslin itself among her tiers—and she knew how to make it rustle with indescribable elegance as she walked. In almost anybody else the rustling and the elegance might have betokened self consciousness. With Electra they were but a part of the natural development of things, no more to be considered in the general scheme of well being than dimples or laughter.

A sudden anxiety overspread her face as they went down the steps, and, with a murmured exclamation, which her companion failed to understand, she flashed swiftly across the yard and out of sight around the corner of the house. The sun seemed to shine a little less brightly in her absence. Miss Wagner even fancied that she felt a slight chilliness in the air, whereupon she stepped inside the door again, throwing her thin cape over her shoulders and fastening it at the throat with an impulse of habitual caution.

"Cold, Miss Wagner?" Mrs. Barker stopped on her way from the dining room to the cellar, her eyes resting kindly upon the listless figure silhouetted against the lavish splendor of the summer morning. "It's this entry does it," she went on. "Most anybody 'll shiver in it, no matter what time of day 'tis. I could use it for an ice chist an' done with it, I tell 'em, if 'twasn't quite so public."

Years of experience had familiarized Mrs. Barker with nearly every phase of the genus summer boarder, but this languid young woman was a new type, not easily classified. The average occupant of her best chamber, for example, would have thought it only courteous to reply to her remarks. Miss Wagner either did not listen to them at all or quite forgot to answer.

"It's lucky for her she seems to take to Electry so," Mrs. Barker soliloquized as she descended the cellar stairs. "She'd be mortal lonesome if she didn't. As a gen'ral thing, she ain't no better 'n a mute at a funeral when I try to talk with her, an' here they two 'll travel off together, day in an' day out, like a pair o' lambs."

A moment later Electra came back, her steps unhurried now, her whole small person radiating serenity. An ancient looking bag of Java canvas hung upon her arm, the faded splendor of its embroidery brought into bold relief by significantly bulging outlines. It sent forth a tempting orchard fragrance at close range, and before the front gate had fairly clicked behind them Electra drew from it a mellow, richly tinted apple, streaked here and there with vivid crimson by the August sun.

"Mother says vittles cheaper 'n doctors any day," she announced, with serious wisdom, as she tasted it, the regularity with which one rapid mouthful followed another demonstrating her hearty concurrence in her mother's opinion. For perhaps five minutes after this she trudged along the narrow country road at Miss Wagner's side in contented silence, her feet raising clouds of yellow dust that obscured at intervals her sturdy little shoes and home knit openwork stockings. At the end of that time she launched briskly into conversation.

"See that brown house over acrost the field, Miss Dorothy? Mis' McDaniel lives over there. Father called her a blamed fool once. I guess you'd like to hear about that," her gray eyes following the closely bitten fragment of apple core that was just describing a prolonged curve over the fence.

"She come over to stay with me one time so mother could go down to the Center with father. He'd got to have a wisdom tooth hauled. Well, they hadn't been gone no time before her daughter Lizbeth's husban' come after her. He said they'd got company to home, an' she must go right back with him at any rate. So she got ready in an orfle hurry an' took me along with her. But she looked out to put away mother's silver spoons, all six of 'em, in the parlor stove before we started. An' she just wrote out in great big letters," balancing herself on her toes here and speaking with dramatic fervor, "'N. B.—I've put the silver in the stove,' an' she pinned it right up outside the winder. She did that, she said, so mother shouldn't worry one mite about the spoons, an' when father saw it he called her a blamed fool."

A little red squirrel glided past on a stone wall and darted up into a chestnut tree with the mysterious grace which nature has bestowed upon her woodland creatures. Electra watched it eagerly. She made a low, chirruping sound which the squirrel apparently saw fit to regard as threatening. There was a swift scurry among the branches, a sudden swirl and flutter of the leaves and then perfect silence.

"He's hid," decided Electra after a brief interval of waiting. "Squirrels ain't no fools—whatever!

"Want to know why father called Mis' McDaniel a blamed fool?" she went on seductively. "I asked him afterwards, an' he said 'twas because the dentist most broke his jaw haulin' that tooth an' he felt ugly, 'too ugly to live,' father said. But I found out for myself why he called her a blamed"—

"Please don't repeat that part, Electra. I can remember it now."

"Why he called her—it. You see, father's name was Noah Barker, an' it madded him to have his 'nitials, N. B., wrote right out on the winder for everybody to read. I don't know's you could blame him for that," wistfully. "Mother didn't, a bit; but she said she'd got to laugh if she was to die for it the next minute.

"There's some more to that story, Miss Dorothy. The rest ain't the real story, though, come to think of it. But that man didn't tell Mis' McDaniel the truth. P'r'aps you don't have to tell the truth to a blamed"— She caught herself up sharply. "Anyway he didn't. When we got to her house, there wasn't any comp'ny there, nobody in the world but old Nurse Perkins, an' a mosquiter wouldn't call her comp'ny. Lizbeth was sick abed, too, an' couldn't 'ave done for comp'ny anyway, an' there I'd get Mis' McDaniel to comb my hair an' put on my ankle ties, all for nothin'. That was the day they showed me the red baby, I remember, an' Lizbeth's husban' made such a fuss about weighin' it."

She sighed with an air of retrospective melancholy.

"Father was took away after that, but I most know 'twasn't because he was too ugly to live. Mother says he was always good as a 'angel,'" with another sigh. At this point her healthy appetite suggested a diversion.

Opposite the driveway at Dr. Gordon's, Electra fumbled in her pocket for the torn margin of the Weekly Chronicle and held it up for inspection. It bore this announcement, written in an unformed, childish hand, "The sowin' serkel's goin' to bee at ower house necks Wensday ranershine without fale."

"Elviry Gordon's hard of hearin'," she explained as she refolded it, "an' she'd rather read things than try to listen to 'em. I went to a picnic with her once"—she had delivered the important message to Miss Gordon and rejoined her companion—"an' it took me all the way to Hackett's Crossin' to make her understand that William Tell 'd got his paws all blacked up with medder mud that mornin'. That was the day she told me she was as deef 's a haddock, an' when I got home I said to mother if ever I went to the village with a haddock I wouldn't tell him a word about medder mud if I had to keep still an' not speak at all. I didn't

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know then that haddocks was fishes. I thought they was folks. An' I don't see yet why the poor things have to be deef any more 'n shad or mack'ril.

"William Tell wasn't William Tell at all then." The echo of an unforgotten regret was in her voice. "He come from Dam'riscotta, an' so I called him Dam'riscotta till mother put her foot down that she wouldn't feed him by any such a name. She said she shouldn't cared anything about it one way or another if he hadn't always sneaked off an' hid, just as he was wanted, but it made her feel foolish to have folks see her dodgin' up an' down the road an' yellin' 'Dam'riscotta!' with no dog anywheres in sight to answer her.

"I told mother once, when I was tryin' to do my sums that I just wished Elviry Gordon was my teacher, an' mother said"—her laughter gurgled forth unrestrained—"that she should hate to say such a thing as that before Tropickercancer even, let alone a human bein'. But Tropickercancer was out on the haymow watchin' for mice when I said it, an' of course 'twas all right to tell it to mother. I should hate long division dreadf'ly, though, Miss Dorothy, if 'twasn't for singin' it, an' even that don't bring the answer. But when you can sing '13 will go in 65' to 'Old Hundred' you don't seem to care so much how many times 'twill go till the teacher stan's you up in the corner to do it over."

Mrs. Barker had asked them to call at the Widow Chesley's and return a sleeve pattern. After much hospitable entreaty Miss Wagner consented to remain there for a half hour and partake of what her hostess termed "a sociable little snack." Electra, with a warm doughnut in either hand, wandered out into the yard. They saw her soon after under the elm tree beside the shed, turning the heavy grindstone with timid rapture. A little later Miss Wagner caught a fleeting glimpse of pink calico at the farthest corner of the barn. Then it flitted down the hill, in and out through the tall grass, and disappeared for a time altogether.

"Electry's a curious child, ain't she?" commented Mrs. Chesley, sipping a little tea for courtesy. "You couldn't hardly believe, if you didn't know her, the funny things she'll say when she gets to goin'."

Miss Wagner wisely held her peace.

"My daughter Eunice keeps the school here, an' she tells me more or less about it. 'Twasn't any time ago hardly that Electry got all wrought up because Eunice told her she lived in North America.

"'I don't,' says Electry. 'I live in Maine.' An' she kep' on sayin' so spite of anything Eunice could do.

"'We all live in Maine,' says Eunice finally, 'but we live in North America too.' An' that young one was madder 'n fury.

"'The state of Maine's just—the state of Maine,' says she. 'Of course there's lots of places in it I ain't never seen, an' mebbe your North America's one of 'em, but I guess it's somewheres way down in Sagadahoc or Andr'scoggin if 'tis.' An' then she burst out laughin' as pleasant as ever. Her temper's always over in no time."

She glanced out of the window from time to time and spoke in a cautious undertone.

"The funniest thing I ever heard of her sayin' was one day in Sabbath school last winter. There was somethin' or other in the lesson that made the minister ask 'em who was the strongest man that ever lived, an' Electry piped right up before anybody else could speak an' called out:

"'Tom Reed!'

"It come so unexpected it pretty near upset the minister, an' every boy in the room begun to giggle.

"'I'm sure he is,' went on Electry, just as calm's a clock, 'for the Chronicle says he's been holdin' congress in the holler of his hand for the last eight days, an' there ain't another man livin' could do it.'

"Mr. Dennett passed over it as well as he could an' took up the next question, but some of them that was there will have it that the superintendent had to get off behind the door an' laugh it out all by himself.

"I often wish her father could have lived," she went on, her kindly face growing grave. "He made a perfect idol of Electry, an' she's just his breathin' image. It's from him she gets her likin' for music, an' if there was one thing in this world Noah Barker 'd set his heart on 'twas buyin' a planner for her an' lettin' her have the good of it while she was growin' up. Of course poor Emeline can't afford to do it now; but, after all, I don't know as there's a happier— Hello, Electry! Back so soon?"

"Mother loves to swap work with Mis' Chesley," remarked Electra, trailing a great spray of goldenrod along the path as they went out. "It don't make her back ache half so much, she tells me, to wash Mis' Chesley's bakin' dishes as it does to wash her own."

The next house was at the end of a long stretch of rising ground which left them somewhat breathless. It was a pleasant looking place, with honeysuckle vines around the open front door and fragrant, old fashioned flower beds in the garden. Electra began to speak in a low and confidential tone as they drew near it.

"This is where the Burleighs live, Miss Dorothy. Le's go right by, as easy as can be. Mis' Burleigh's just killed a man," in an awestruck whisper, "an' mebbe she wouldn't want to see us."

"Electra!"

"I don't know but mother 'd tune me for tellin' you, but she didn't say I mustn't. Mis' Curtis was talkin' to her about it last night, an' I set there on the cricket studyin' about the arctic circle. I almost know mother remembered I was there.

"Mis' Curtis told lots of things about this man. He was a soldier, a drummer in Mr. Jordan Marsh's company, she said. He f.lt sick on the train an' got off here at the middle depot. Mr. Burleigh see him there an' brought him home—him an' all his drums, I guess." At this point she hesitated, but conscious rectitude upbore her. "There was somethin' about a fever's runnin'. I didn't quite get that. An' then she said: 'I reckon poor Mis' Burleigh's done it now for herself. She's took all the care of that Mr. Smith for two mortal weeks, an' now see how it's turned out. He wanted to be h'isted up in bed this mornin', Mr. Burleigh said, after she'd given him his medicine, an' she went an' put her hand under the back of his head, an' he was gone in no time. That's a queer thing, to kill a man, ain't it? Mis' Curtis said she was a sick woman an' all wore out with him. I s'pose that's how she happened to do it. Now, there's the soldiers' home over to Togus. Likely the poor thing would 'a' been better off there."

They crossed the road involuntarily and went by the house with an air of virtuous avoidance, but under the popular trees beyond the barn Electra suddenly halted.

"I guess I ain't never told you about Harry Sylvester,' Miss Dorothy. He hasn't got only one leg, but his mother says he makes up for it in hands. I can't ever see any extry ones, but of course she'd ought to know. Poor Mis' Sylvester! She has things enough to make her feel bad. Dr. Gordon says Harry's father was poorer 'n one of Job's cats when they first come here, an' now he's gettin' to be a four handed man. Seems as if somethin' kept happenin' to him all the time, don't it? Now Harry's had his leg cut off, an' prob'ly he'll be four handed, too, before he gets through with it. I was thinkin' that p'raps Mis' Burleigh 'd send him some of them drums if anybody spoke to her about it," her frank eyes full of sympathy.

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand about the drums at Mrs. Burleigh's, dear," said Miss Wagner faintly. "Suppose we sit down here by the brook and rest awhile."

"Everybody likes Mr. Burleigh," resumed Electra after according what seemed to her sufficient time for a graceful change of subjects.

"Aunt Octavia used to say that he'd give you his eyeteeth if you asked for 'em. I never quite believed it when she said it, but I went over there once to do an errand, an' I was plannin' to speak to him about it." She burst into a roguish laugh at the recollection, displaying to advantage her own teeth, safely past the transition period and now gleaming in even whiteness.

"When I got there, Miss Dorothy, he didn't have a tooth in the world, except some that was up on the kitchen shelf in a cracked tumbler, an' so I run home an' told Aunt Octavia somebody 'd asked him for 'em an' got 'em. That was ever so long ago, when I didn't know any better.

"I love my Aunt Octavia dearly, but she's queer sometimes. She don't like dreams very well. I had a real bad dream once when I was a little girl. Seems as if mother didn't have father then, but I don't know sure, for I was such a little girl.

"But mother an' me 'd been havin' a norfle good time in the evenin', poppin' corn an' tellin' stories an' all that, an' she het up my feet in front of the stove an' said 'Two little pigs went to market' on 'em before she put me to bed, an' then afterwards I dreamt that I heard mother cryin'. Of course I thought I'd waked up. You always do think you've waked up, don't you, Miss Dorothy, when you get to dreamin'?

"I see mother lookin' dretfle sober, settin' down front of the bureau an' handlin' over some papers she took out of a box. Then I dreamt she kissed a square thing that was kinder shet up in her hand an' cried an' cried, just as I did when I cut my finger with the choppin' knife.

"I told mother about it the next day. She laughed at me an' said little folks mustn't 'magine things, an' then she went into the kitchen to stir her cramb'ry sauce, as smilin' as could be. But just as soon as she'd got out of hearin' up jumped Aunt Octavia an' grabbed holt of my shoulder an' shook me as if I was a tablecloth, an' she says, 'Don't you never tell your mother that dream again as long as you live an' breathe.' There's lots of things makes her nervous. Mother ain't never nervous," a satisfied ripple in her voice.

"Aunt Octavia an' I had a secret once," she went on in a gentle flow of reminiscence. "I was stayin' over to her house while Uncle Silas sugared off."

She threw a pebble into the brook and watched the widening circles on the water with an air of reflective speculation.

"What was the secret, Electra?" asked Miss Wagner after a moment's silence.

"Oh, yes," still looking at the water and speaking half absently. "I was lonesome for mother one night after I got into bed, an' auntie left a candle burning, but 'twas a little bit of a one, an' it sputtered. I said, 'Now I lay me,' just as if mother was there. Then the candle sputtered again, an' I began to say, 'Our Father.' They heard me then, an' they came runnin' upstairs in a norfle hurry, an' Aunt Octavia says: 'You little screech owl, you'll scare me into fits! What under the canopy are you shoutin' that way for?'

"That was worse 'n the candle, for I didn't know what she meant, but I told her that the prayer said, 'Hollered be thy name,' an' that was why I'd been hollerin'.

"Then Aunt Octavia said, 'I don't know how it strikes you, Si, but I do b'lieve there's somethin' lackin' in the upper story.'

"Uncle Silas said there wasn't. He said he'd bet a cooky 'twould come out all right in course of time; better wait an' see.

"I guess I went to sleep after that, but some time—mebbe 'twas the next day—auntie told me we'd have a secret. Then she got me to promise I wouldn't tell a livin' soul about the upper story, not even mother. I said I didn't want to tell mother; she'd feel so bad if there was anything the matter with auntie's house. I think Uncle Silas felt bad, too, for he kep' whistlin' while she was makin' me promise, an' he said: 'I should think you'd feel like singin' pretty small about that speech, Tavy.' I asked Aunt Octavia about it once a little while ago, an' she said the upper story was all right now. So I s'pose 'tis, but I can't see a single bit of difference when I go there. Auntie ain't never been very well, mother says, an' she takes notions. I s'pose that's why she's always tellin' me not to talk the boarders stone blind, an' I never talked anybody blind in my life, 'cept p'r'aps Tropickercancer's kittens, an' they got right over it."

The intervals of fruit scented silence began to grow more frequent. Had Eve been like Electra, Adam would have found it easy to withstand her half hearted solicitations. Her occasional "Don't you want a napple, too?" sounded too mechanical and perfunctory to elicit even a refusal. Afterward, when she saw that the long suffering canvas bag went home empty, Miss Wagner found it necessary to assure herself in a dazed sort of way that she had positively not eaten a single apple that morning.

It was with a sensation akin to terror that she detected indications of hunger in Electra on the way home.

"Mother told me we was goin' to have stewed chicken for dinner, an' toast with lots of gravy on it," began that young person hopefully.

She was climbing the great stone post under the Osborne maples now, and her next words fluttered downward with soft, uneven emphasis.

"We're goin' to have green apple pie, too, an' new cheese an' coffee. Now, look out for leaves when I scrabble," poising herself securely on the post and beginning a vigorous attack upon the lower branches of the maples.

"Electra," said Miss Wagner suddenly a moment later.

"Yes, Miss Dorothy." Her rosy little face, with tangled curls blown across it, became gradually visible through the shower of leaves that had followed the "scrabble."

"You've shaken the trees enough for one day, haven't you, child? Come down now and listen to me for a minute."

Electra sprang from the post in prompt obedience.

"I've been thinking of what your Aunt Octavia said, Electra"—Miss

"Electry's a curious child, ain't she?"

Wagner was making futile efforts to reduce the tangled hair to something like order—"and I really don't believe there is any need of her worrying about the boarders. I have listened to you all the morning, to say nothing of other mornings that could be mentioned, and I am not stone blind by any means. On the contrary, I'm beginning to suspect that I see better from week to week, and if that is so you must have been my atmospheric illuminant."

The smile with which she spoke was quizzical and merry. A sudden blithe animation seemed to possess her.

The next few sentences Electra lost entirely. With her eyes bent upon the ground she was struggling with the two mysterious words that had caught and absorbed her attention, words that a sure instinct told her she was not likely to hear again, "At-mos-pheric ill-illu—; atmospheric"—

And then Miss Wagner's voice destroyed forever the possibility of fitting those fascinating but elusive syllables into the mosaic of her vocabulary.

"So the new piano will come next week, Electra," the voice was saying, with the same unfamiliar buoyancy in its tones, "and it's going to be your very—precious—little—own."

The ardent joyousness of Electra's smile rivaled the sunlight which flooded the dining room that noon. It had lost none of its radiance when, having disposed of two heaping platefuls of chicken and baked potatoes, followed in due course by "green apple pie, new cheese and coffee," she laid down her knife and fork with a sigh of perfect satisfaction.

"I'm so happy I can't eat another mouthful," she said apologetically. "I guess I'll go out and tell Tropickercancer."

Standing by the window, Miss Wagner saw her cross the yard with rapid steps in the direction of the barn. Before its open door she paused in momentary indecision, then turned and ran, with a hop, skip and jump, straight toward the farthest corner of the orchard, where the New York pippins grew.

Hurried the Work.

The owner of a brewery in England began the construction of a new cellar at a late period of the year; but, to his great annoyance, very little progress was made with the excavations notwithstanding the large number of workmen employed. All at once, however, a spirit of wild enthusiasm seemed to come over the men, and they now worked with unflagging industry from the first streak of dawn till late in the evening. When the ground had been excavated to a sufficient depth, they had almost to be prevented by main force from penetrating still deeper into the soil, and they departed with sadness from the scene of their activity.

The brewer rubbed his hands with delight. What was the solution of the riddle? He had placed in an old earthenware pot, corroded with salt, a strip of parchment, on which he had written the following words in an antiquated hand: "Moche money lyeth here below. Whosoever findeth ytt maye kepe ytt." He then covered the vessel with a weather worn piece of slate and buried it in a spot where the workmen would find it the next day.